

SAFER SPACES WHITE PAPER #6

**“NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US”
TESTED PRACTICES FOR TAKING A
SURVIVOR-INFORMED APPROACH TO
POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**



YWCA
HALIFAX

NATIONAL ADVOCACY.
COMMUNITY ACTION.

INTRODUCTION

Across industries, it is well understood that when conducting research of any kind, the most credible sources of information are people with expertise on the topic in question. So, when developing programs and policies to address commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, YWCA Halifax looks to the experts: people with lived experience (who are, at some points of this paper, referred to as survivors).

The phrase “Nothing about us, without us,” which is thought to have originated by South African disAbility rights activists¹, now headlines many human rights movements. After decades of tireless advocacy by people who experience marginalization, a growing number of social sectors are recognizing the importance of this approach. They are finally hearing that the experts that need to be consulted when creating and changing policy and developing programs are the people most impacted by the programs and policies.

A report by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal network notes that “the social and organizational response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been profoundly impacted by the growth

of a self-identified community of people demanding a say in the development of policies and the delivery of services.”² That is, the persistence of individuals most impacted (in this case, IV drug users and the queer community) requiring that they be included has drastically improved the landscape of services available to the community, and therefore the health and wellbeing of people most impacted by HIV/AIDS. The report also importantly recognizes that “as an ethical principle, all people should have the right to be involved in decisions affecting their lives.”

Similarly, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects released a detailed report arguing for sex workers to be considered experts and at the forefront of decision-making that impacts their lives.³

In the case of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, this means centering people who have worked in the sex trade, either by situational choice (survival sex work), coercion, or force. That is, people who have experienced sexual exploitation and human trafficking and its impact. This is called lived experience, or first voice.

In Nova Scotia, the Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS) holds survival engagement at the heart of its values, training and program and policy development. Since 2017, there have been several different ways that the partnership has engaged with and incorporated survivor knowledge into its activities. Initially, a small group of survivors were convened through Stepping Stone, the longest running non-profit agency in Halifax serving people who are engaged in the sex trade, to lay a foundation of knowledge, not only about the services and support they need, but also about how to appropriately engage and consult with survivors in a way that is trauma-informed and non-exploitative of the knowledge they share with us. Due to a lack of funding to support honoraria for participants, this original survivor advisory ended in 2019.

In 2020, YWCA Halifax engaged in the first ever Hearing Them project. Hearing Them was funded by the Community Foundation of Canada (NS) under the pillars of Peace and Power; empowering women, girls and trans-folk to participate in their own healing journey and to amplify their voices towards change. Hearing Them was a Covid pivot project that was originally funded to provide


survivor-informed professional training to the Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS) Network.

From the findings of the 2020 Hearing Them project, the All-Survivor Peer Empowerment Network (ASPEN) began in 2021 as a 10-month pilot program funded by the Canadian Women’s Foundation. The goal was to connect to rural survivors of sexual exploitation and human trafficking and conduct consultations and focus groups to identify the needs going unmet in their communities.

These small focus groups were convened by YWCA Halifax in partnership with agencies located in Truro (Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia), Windsor (Peer Outreach Support Services

Safer Spaces White Paper #6
Charlene Gagnon, Nora Richter and
Melanie DesRoche – YWCA Halifax

© Copyright 2022 YWCA Halifax

For more information about
YWCA Halifax please
visit www.ywcahalifax.com
Visit us on    @ywcahalifax

We would like to thank The Canadian
Women’s Foundation for supporting the
TESS Partnership and The Nova Scotia
Advisory Council on the Status of
Women for supporting this research

For more information about the TESS
Partnership visit www.tessns.com

and Education; POSSE), and Sydney (The Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Resource Centre). The ASPEN program ran concurrently with YWCA Halifax's Coordinated Access to Support Exit (CASE) program, and included urban survivors at Stepping Stone as well, to assist in the development of a model of wrap-around services and support that can help facilitate an exit from the sex trade.

As with all consultations, methods are the key to success. This White Paper outlines how YWCA Halifax approaches first voice engagement and how it has been central to the development of CASE, other programs offered by YWCA Halifax, as well as areas for advocacy. Careful consideration ensures everyone involved in the consultation process feels safe, heard, and valued. Additionally, it is important to be intentional not just about the engagement itself, but how participants are recruited. To ensure that perspectives are diverse and reflective of the community being consulted, it is critical to consider how to best reach the people from whose expertise you are hoping to learn.

From start to finish, this white paper explains what it means to engage meaningfully in first voice consultation with survivors. The strategies described in

this paper can, in many cases, be transferred to working with other communities who experience stigmatization and marginalization, for example when consulting with people who have experienced poverty and/or homelessness, people who are drug users, etc. It also highlights the lessons learned from these engagement and consultation activities, with particular attention paid to inclusion, best practice for engagement and leveraging information gathered into policy, programs, services, and systemic change for the benefit of communities.

YWCA Halifax is incredibly grateful to the tenacious and concerned survivors who have entrusted us with their stories of injustice in pursuit of better community care and outcomes for people who experience sexual exploitation and human trafficking. It was no small feat to contribute to these conversations and we are deeply thankful to the survivors who participated in ASPEN and Hearing Them. Their community-mindedness and concern is what leads to policy and program change that will reduce violence and improve resource provision in Nova Scotia.

QUICK REFERENCE FOR ACRONYMS AND PROGRAMS

ASPEN – All-Survivor Peer Empowerment Network. Program funded by Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021-2022. Purpose to 1) increase knowledge and awareness of the various experiences of sexual exploitation and human trafficking among rural communities 2) provide opportunities for survivors to develop skills for new careers and to gain financial independence and security 3) integrate survivor knowledge into rural services and supports and 4) support one another in their recovery and learning through a connected network across Nova Scotia.

CASE – Coordinated Access to Support Access. Program funded by Women and Gender Equity Canada, 2021-2024. Purpose to 1) Convene and test a system of trauma-informed, wrap-around supports to assist in exiting the sex trade. 2) Implement and test an emergency fund available to victims and survivors across the province with direct and indirect housing costs. 3) Test a model of coordinated access for cases of complex trauma associated with sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

TESS (NSTEP) 2017 Survivor Advisory – Program funded by Canadian Women's Foundation, 2016-2021 and the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 2020-2025. Purpose 1) Public awareness: spark conversation, facilitate social change and increase community understanding on the issue of sexual violence, including where to get help, through a variety of activities 2) Community engagement: organize and host gatherings/conversations to help develop community capacity, promote community ownership, encourage citizens to be involved in creating safer communities. 3) Education and Training: coordinate / deliver education and training on how to support survivors of sexual violence or other relevant professional development needs as identified by the community. 4) Project Development: help community members implement projects related to sexual violence prevention and supports that have been identified by the community. 5) Networking: provide opportunities for community members to get to know one another and the types of services and supports that are available in the area. 6) Foster Partnerships: promote a coordinated and collaborative approach between community members, community organizations, and government (when applicable) to develop and deliver community-selected activities and responses 7) Capacity Building: increasing community members, community organizations and government's ability to work effectively and responsively with victims of YSE through skill development, resource-sharing and developing a sustainable systemic response.

2020 Hearing Them – Project funded by Community Foundation of Canada – Nova Scotia, 2019-2020. Purpose 1) Empowering women, girls and trans-folk to participate in their own healing journey and to amplify their voices towards change 2021 Hearing Them. Project funded by Canadian Women's Foundation 2021 with remaining funds from TESS funding.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

LANGUAGE

The language used to engage first voice on consultations is fundamental to principles of inclusion and engagement in planning and delivery of programs and services. The language we use as service providers to describe people's lived experience may not always line up with an individual's own labeling of those experiences. Much of the language used to label lived experience of sex trade engagement can be highly stigmatizing and come loaded with stereotypes, bias and assumptions.

In 2017 the first voice individuals we consulted with were asked if there was any distinction or differences between trafficking and sex work. The consensus of survivors was that trafficking was thought of as involving a pimp or 3rd party, and sex work was independent. However, some survivors made no distinction between trafficking and sex work; "It's all slavery." Another distinction made was that trafficking was thought

of as being coerced or forced and sex work was considered a "choice." But choice was also thought to be connected to vulnerability, survival and a lack of opportunity or privilege to make other choices.

When we are seeking to engage the first voice or lived experience perspective it is important to be as inclusive as possible in the language used. This means following the language that participants use to describe themselves: as either "trafficking victims" or "sex workers" and not preventing people from participating in consultations, research or any form of engagement based on how they self-identify.

COMPENSATION

When we ask people with lived experience to consult and engage with us, we are asking them for their own personal expertise, which is not something that can be taught in school or gained anywhere else. The information they share with us is extremely valuable and as such, must be compensated

As service providers, we might feel confident to label a person as a "victim" of human trafficking or exploitation, but that person might not view their own experiences as such. It is important to recognize that for some, the word "victim" may be disempowering or traumatizing. Further, as people engage in the sex trade, the nature of their involvement may change over time, so someone could identify as being a former victim of human trafficking and a current independent sex worker at the same time.

at levels which recognize and honor them as experts. The amount to compensate participants can vary, depending on the level and depth of engagement involved. For example, in 2017 when we asked participants to fill out a 15-minute paper survey, we offered \$20. In the case of ASPEN, which were focus group style sessions related to general conversations about needs and services, participants were paid \$50 for a 1.5-hour session. For more intensive engagements, such as the Hearing Them project, which was one-to-one and approximately an hour long, we offered \$75 in 2020 and \$80 in 2021. The \$5 increase between years was related to logistics of paying cash – it was easier for service providers to have \$20 bills on hand rather than having to worry about making change.

We must always be careful about the balance of compensation and exploitation. Offering \$5 Tim Hortons Gift Cards or anything below a living wage level, would be considered exploitative.

There is often a debate around whether to offer cash as opposed to gift cards in cases of compensation. From an organizational perspective, gift cards are seen as “easier” to purchase and distribute, however, when we asked participants, they almost always preferred cash over gift cards. Offering gift cards instead of cash removes autonomy in how people may choose to spend the money received. Concerns voiced from some service providers and participants related to cash were mainly focused on participants who were known to use substances and whether gift cards were better from a harm-reduction perspective. Some participants identified having a sudden influx of cash as triggering.

Service providers with lived experience themselves, however, told us that most dealers would accept gift cards as payment anyway, but offer less than the dollar value of the gift card. If people wanted to use their compensation to access substances, giving a gift card instead of cash would not necessarily prevent that. Another peer worker passionately advocated for cash over gift cards with regards to the intense engagement that resulted from the Hearing Them project; “We are asking these women to bare their souls to help us do our jobs better – what message are we sending when we treat them as incapable of making their own decisions about how they spend the money? It is unfair to only offer gift cards and not cash.” Ultimately, building choice into compensation is best practice. If possible, allow participants to choose cash or gift cards for compensation themselves, rather than taking a paternal approach and choosing for them.

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of discretion when providing compensation. They shared that when consultation sessions are known to be happening, people may wait outside the session for them, knowing that they would have just been given cash and/or gift cards. As such, being discreet about offering compensation is important to the safety of participants.

INCLUSION

As highlighted in White Paper #1, there are a variety of values and opinions about who should be included in service provision, and that extends to consultations about the needs of victims and survivors of human trafficking. Early in our partnership work, there was a group of stakeholders who believed that all forms of sex trade participation were inherently exploitative, did not support the legitimacy of “sex work,” and therefore did not think it was appropriate to include those who identify as sex workers in any consultations on the needs of trafficking victims.

However, the human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of youth often happens in the context of the adult sex trade, so the expertise of adult sex workers also participating in this context was seen to be valuable and a good place to start with engagement. Further, there were significant concerns from peer workers and other service providers around consulting with youth and how it may intersect with a duty to report to child protection services. Safety considerations about engaging individuals who were either still under the control of a 3rd party trafficker, or still processing the trauma of their experiences, also influenced decisions around inclusion. At that time, the partnership and the province were without appropriate responses, services and supports to offer if people required safe harbor or intensive aftercare support if triggered through consultation. By 2020, there was a baseline of services and supports in place in NS, and a multitude of partnering agencies had identified participants who were sex trade engaged across

the province beyond the HRM, where Stepping Stone primarily worked. So, inclusion for the first Hearing Them project was broader than the initial Survivor Advisory.

The main inclusion principle used for the 2020 Hearing Them project was related to existing connections with TESS Partner Agencies. The project was administered by seven agencies in various communities across Nova Scotia: Halifax Regional Municipality, Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Colchester County, East Hants and the Tri-County Region of Western Nova Scotia. This strategy ensured that participants were already connected to supports so that if they required any follow-up, they already had a place/ resource to connect. The other inclusion principles were that participants be 16 years or older and currently or formerly engaged in the sex trade. These three principles also formed the basis of inclusion in the ASPEN Program, with targeted inclusion of rural or remotely located survivors being a requirement of the funding.

Despite taking intentional measures to include as broad a population as possible in the 2020 Hearing Them project, the sample notably missed the experiences of boys and men. It was later considered that this was likely because 5 of the 7 agencies that participated exclusively supported women, girls and gender expansive participants.

For the 2021 Hearing Them project, additional measures were taken to neutralize gendered language in the call for engagement (which will be discussed in the next section) and for targeted outreach to boys and men who may be engaged who consented to participation.

In the 2020 project, there were also very few responses from youth between the ages of 16-18. As it is believed that youth who are in the care of the Department of Community Services make up the largest population of this age group, the lack of youth representation was explainable. The Department of Community Services was not one of our

partners on this project, and the handful of youth who did participate did so with the permission of their parent, foster parent or guardian. The 2021 Hearing Them interview tool was revised to include more questions than in 2020, and as a result, more questions about indicators of familial trafficking and exploitation were included. This changed the considerations around age inclusion, as any disclosure of familial exploitation would be subject to Nova Scotia's Duty to Report up to the age of 18. To ensure we could offer participants a safe space to share their stories, we increased the participation age to 18 years old.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

SAFETY CONCERNS (PARTICIPANTS & STAFF)

- **Safe space:** Where to meet? Should be same space every time?
- **Other safety:** Use different names? Plans for where they were (not at advisory mtg), safe space, risky questions
- **Self-care:** Significant debrief portion of the end of meeting (check-in, support, activity such as yoga, art, cooking) with info about crisis lines and support as well.
- **Address crisis:** Including but not limited to interpersonal group member issues.
- Safety parameters for staff

PRACTICALITIES

- **How to communicate:** E.g. when the next meeting will be: email, phone, etc.?
- **Practical pieces:** Have condoms available, transportation, payment for each meeting
- **Compensation:** How much per session? Gift cards or cash?
- **Refreshments**
- **Risk Management**
- **Transportation**
- **Child care**
- **Length of meetings, including breaks**

MAKE-UP OF GROUP

- **Inclusion:** Who is the targeted group?
- **How do members want to participate:** Anonymously, individually, part of group?
- **How many people per group?**
- **Flexibility** in what this looks like e.g. two smaller groups vs. one larger group
- **How do we engage with people outside of the HRM?** Survey? Interview? Phone?
- **Fluid groups membership**
- **Outreach:** How are we inviting them? (meet with first?)

INFORMATION SHARING

- **What are the questions we want to ask/ what info are we gathering:** Why are we asking these questions, what are we going to do with the answers?
- **Confidentiality** and respect amongst members as well as staff.
- **How do we collect info?** How do we share info back (from coalition, etc.)?
- **Recording:** Do we take notes, they sign off? They take notes? We get their pre-approval for what we will say? Integrate this conversation at end of every meeting?
- **Integration :** Is it appropriate to have service providers at first voice table? Service providers as guest speakers?
- **Informed Consent:** How do we share information and insights gained?

ENGAGEMENT & COLLABORATION

All our survivor engagement projects were facilitated through partnerships with agencies who had already established trusting relationships with participants. Working with victims, survivors, victors, and thrivers in a meaningful way is predominantly relational and based on the trust built between the participant and the primary agency that is supporting them. This means that often, agencies are particularly protective of “their” participants. Through the TESS partnership, YWCA Halifax, as the administrative and hosting agency of these programs, has worked to establish relationships with service providers already supporting the population. Our partners extended that trust to their own participants and, coupled with a desire for their participants to be represented and benefiting from the opportunities, YWCA Halifax was able to extend to their participants.

Partnering on the delivery of programs and engagement projects is hard work and requires open and transparent communication. Tensions can arise, and it is important to maintain a balance of benefit between the organization holding the resources for the project and the organizations assisting in the delivery of the project. For the most part, partnering agencies can see how this engagement is empowering and beneficial to their

participants, however, we also do not want to exploit the heavy lifting they are doing in this work, so it is important to compensate organizational partners as well as program participants.

The 2020 Hearing Them project sub-contracted the facilitation of the one-on-one survey sessions to the partner agencies and compensated them for their staff time, in addition to offering participants honoraria for their expertise.

In the case of ASPEN, working alongside other service providers made it much easier to fill seats in each session. As the purpose of ASPEN was to do deeper focus group sessions related to policy and program development, these partnerships also ensured that we were reaching the people who those decisions would most effect.

Through their deep knowledge and fierce advocacy for their participants, service providers were able to help identify and reduce engagement barriers such as providing transportation for participants to and from the sessions, using their existing program space for the sessions that participants were already familiar with, and ensuring safety among participants by taking the lead on registration for them.

Other planning elements about content, scheduling, restrictions, and safety, were discussed in meetings with services providers, and the program was also able to be flexible to adapt as issues were

identified or things that hadn't considered emerged.

The ASPEN participants were also consulted in the design of the 2021 Hearing Them project, and through this we learned that participants wanted to

see broader outreach and engagement take place, beyond those who were only accessing services. This led to a great deal of consideration about how to do outreach beyond the scope of existing program access.

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT

- Compile a list of partners who have indicated that they know individuals who have lived experience, who would be willing to participate
- Consult with service partners regarding best methods to engage their clients. It is possible that you will not find a one size fits all framework and have to create different frameworks for different groups
- Assess potential harms and benefits; strengths and weaknesses of different engagement processes
- Plan for sustainable and meaningful engagement - It is reasonable to expect that not all participants will be interested in long-term engagement, but this can be enhanced by being transparent with participants and providing them with as much information as possible, and discovering what levels of commitment they are prepared to make to the process
- Create an outline for each individual consultation session along with essential information about the activity including:
 1. Purpose of activity
 2. When and where the activity will take place
 3. The number of participants
 4. Information collected through the activity
 5. How many participants are interested in ongoing engagement and participation?
- Every activity should be evaluated once complete which includes an analysis of what worked and what didn't work in the activity. This will assist in future activities and refine the process of engagement. Questions to consider in evaluation could include:
 1. Did the time or place of the activity prevent or encourage people from attending?
 2. Were the methods of engagement appropriate for the participants?
 3. Were the correct questions asked?
 4. Was the information collected at the session accurately recorded?
 5. Did the participants feel heard?
 6. Will the participants continue with engagement?

SAFETY

Considering participant safety is absolutely the most important component of planning any consultation. Creating a safe(r) space where participants feel comfortable is necessary. Otherwise, you will not collect the information required to develop survivor informed policy and programs.

When engaging the same participants in multiple sessions, remaining consistent in the format of the consultation can help to ease some of the anxiety that participants might feel about attending the sessions, since they know what to expect. This can be particularly helpful in establishing some safety for survivors of trauma.

Before getting into any consultation, it is important to take time establishing a safe(r) space for everyone. This goes beyond selecting a physical space that is comfortable and confidential for the participants. It is important for facilitators to introduce themselves and provide detailed context about why they are there, how they will maintain confidentiality, and what they plan to do with

the information collected. Given that some participants may know each other in various capacities outside, it is also important to establish guidelines and expectations within the group around confidentiality and respect.

During the ASPEN sessions, we used sticky notes to engage in this process, so that if people didn't feel comfortable sharing their boundaries aloud, they could write them down. Another important aspect of establishing some safety within the space is letting people know that they are not required to share their legal name or any identifying factors as a requirement for participating. Participants were given the chance to introduce themselves with the name and pronouns they wanted to be referred to, and facilitators set the expectation that participants not share any identifying information about each other (if they knew each other). Participants were asked to speak only for themselves and their own experiences. Confidentiality needs to be an agreed upon value of every single person in the room, including facilitators, partners/service providers, and participants. Participants were asked not to share names or identifying

factors about anyone other than themselves. This helps to prevent conflict escalation and/or potential safety concerns outside of the session.

Moving into the consultation portion, it was important to provide context for why questions were being asked, and to only ask questions that would illicit relevant information. Given how emotionally taxing it can be to share personal experience, it is important to not ask personal questions if the information is not required for the research being conducted. Additionally, using open ended questions helps to ensure participants have control over the direction of the conversation and are given the opportunity to offer valuable information that might not be captured with very direct and specific questions. As the learners in the room, the facilitators' role is to be open to what the participants feel is important to share. An example of a question used throughout the ASPEN consultations was: "What do you wish service providers knew about xyz?" Open-ended questions also allow participants to share as much or as little information as they are comfortable without "outing" themselves to the

group in ways they are not comfortable. Providing the questions ahead of time, or at least context of what will be discussed, can also be helpful. Sometimes during ASPEN, we offered the questions and then took a break. This gives the participants time to consider the question, as well as what they would and would not like to share in response.

For the Hearing Them project, where individuals were asked to share their personal stories and have their answers recorded and aggregated, considerations for safety included a guarantee of participant anonymity. Only the person asking the questions in the interview would know their responses. No names or identifying information was collected, and participants were allowed to use initials or pseudonyms for accounting purposes/receipts for payment.

In both Hearing Them and ASPEN, participants were never required to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable answering. When consulting people with lived experience, choice is a vital part of establishing trust, a sense of safety and control. Using a focus group format really helps

with this guideline, since you are not calling on individuals to share and instead create space for them to add their perspective whenever they feel comfortable. It is important for people to remain in control of the information they share and give informed consent on how that information is intended to be shared and used.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Every time we consult with victims, survivors, victors and thrivers, we make a commitment to honour their stories and expertise, and to use the information collected to influence the systemic change that needs to happen to effectively support this population. People engaged in the sex trade are highly stigmatized, marginalized, and vulnerable, and can provide valuable insights into prevention and awareness education. Participants of our first voice consultations need to see and trust that we are using this information for their benefit and for their communities, and not for the benefit of 3rd party academics, service providers, or value-based government agendas.

It is important to keep in mind that service providers, who

have the best of intentions, can only tell us so much. Even service providers with lived experience might have been out of “the game” for some time, meaning the knowledge they do have may not reflect the most current issues people are facing. That said, it is important to not discredit any feedback received from the participants themselves or from the service providers that partner on engagement. It is important to value everyone’s feedback and recognize that experiences will be diverse among victims and survivors. No single voice should be upheld as a monolith for all.

When we take all the information and identify the recurring themes, rather than focusing in on individual’s stories, we can avoid the persistent problems of tokenization and the perpetuation of grand narratives that tend to occur with first voice engagement on any issue, not just this complex one of commercial sexual exploitation.

This section highlights the themes that came through our engagement projects, and how we have previously, and continuously, leveraged them into various lasting systemic and service impacts.

2017 Survivor Advisory

The foundational work established by the 2017 Survivor Advisory around appropriate levels of compensation and the key principles of effective programs, services and supports, reverberates throughout the TESS system. All the principles established for current and future consultation projects and programs that are administered through YWCA Halifax came from the baseline of knowledge shared in those early days of the partnership.

Survivor knowledge and expertise gained from interviews, focus groups and brainstorming sessions were leveraged to create a suite of materials for service providers, law enforcement, and educators to assist in the identification of children and youth at-risk for commercial sexual exploitation. Posters, quick reference guides, and training materials were all developed from the findings.

The 2017 Advisory also drew attention to the gap of peer-based, trauma-specific, programs across the province. Through advocacy, crucial investments were made to begin piloting and testing support programs and services such as YWCA Halifax’s NSTAY program, E-Fry’s GATE

Program, and the Jane Paul Indigenous Women’s Resource Centre to name a few.

2020 Hearing Them Project

Although there were many findings from the 2020 Hearing Them project, the TESS Partners focused on those which could be leveraged into policy and program design. These included unmet participant needs for continuing education and employment opportunities; the complexity of lifelong trauma they had experienced since childhood and into their adult lives, which left them particularly vulnerable to systemic re-traumatization; the need for more recreational opportunities outside of the outcome of “recovery” or “healing”; and the need to develop targeted inclusion methods and more precise consultation questions, particularly around gender and racial identity. What followed from these findings was the development of the ASPEN groups. The ASPEN consultations sustained the engagement of participants on policy and programming. The primary goal of ASPEN was to engage with survivors who may be interested in becoming peer support workers and advance their skills and education to do so. One of the five ASPEN sessions

was facilitated in partnership with the Nova Scotia Community College, to assist with the design and development of continuing education programs that would support survivors to make a career change, or move into the field of peer support.

Related to issues of systemic traumatization, particularly from law enforcement, justice and health systems, targeted training recruitment and information sessions with actors from those systems were designed and delivered, with a particular emphasis on hospital and mental health staff and professionals. Additionally, through findings related to criminal justice system involvement, the TESS Partnership began to name and acknowledge the deep intersections between victimization and criminalization. Reducing stigma around sex trade involvement and its relationship to the criminal justice system is now a key outcome of the TESS Partnership, in all the ways that can happen.

Several TESS partners from the non-profit sector have written proposals for recreational and leisure-based activities across the province in response to the identified gap in services

available in communities. Generally, through Hearing Them, we were able to encourage service providers to think of the whole person in program planning, not just the trauma of their experiences and basic material needs.

Finally, it was through the ambiguity of results on the dimensions of gender and race from the 2020 Hearing Them project which led to a rich and fulsome conversation about how to appropriately capture identity data in the context of a survey/interview. It served as a springboard for direct and intentional engagement with African Nova Scotian, Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ partners to address and meaningfully capture the diversity in people's identities.

There was no formal report or analysis from the 2020 Hearing Them project. Statistical findings were shared internally to the TESS partnership and with government to inform the development of emerging programs, policies, supports and services.

ASPEN AND THE 2021 HEARING THEM PROJECT

The first ASPEN session was dedicated to discussion about the 2021 Hearing Them project, and the results from that session were directly incorporated into the design of the interview tool and outreach activities.

Participants had strong feelings about the inclusion of people who were not engaged with service providers, and on having the choice of who facilitated the interviews. Through that feedback, the 2021 Hearing Them project included an option for participation through a contracted peer outreach worker. Outreach was extended through word-of-mouth referrals within the community, and posters were distributed in agencies that were not conducting the interviews themselves. The result of these measures was increased participation; 148 participants in 2021 compared to 95 in 2020.

On the interview tool, ASPEN participants suggested better ways to word questions and offered a host of new questions they felt were important to ask. The groups reminded us of the importance of language when talking to them about gender, race, and sexual orientation

and that the jargon we tend to use as service providers does not always translate to understanding about the questions we were asking. They also assisted us in expanding the possible responses people might have to the questions were asking, which led to a precise and expansive questionnaire.

Once the 2021 Hearing Them data was collected and summarized, ASPEN partners and participants were the first stakeholders to review and provide additional information and analysis to the statistics generated. ASPEN groups also assisted in the identification of themes to prioritize and action. Reports of those findings will be released over 2022.

ASPEN AND CASE

Two of the ASPEN sessions were dedicated to consultation on needs and safety in accessing services. While the APSEN consultations resulted in a wealth of knowledge translation, the following learnings were the most pivotal in developing CASE.

Survivor voices are the foundation on which the Coordinated Access to Support Exit (CASE) program has been built. Through offering support to survivors with the NSTAY program, as well as hearing feedback through the TESS Network, YWCA Halifax saw how challenging it is for survivors to access services that are necessary to their safety and overall wellbeing. This is where the idea for CASE first came from; a coordinated response to support survivors looking to exit the sex trade that removes some of the burden of communicating with multiple providers.

CASE was developed in partnership with five agencies who continue to provide consultation services about the program, as well as support its ongoing operation to ensure that the program is as inclusive and relevant as possible. These partners are the Association of Black Social Workers, Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, Jane Paul Indigenous Resource Centre, People's Counselling Clinic, and Stepping Stone. Most importantly, the CASE process was informed and vetted by survivors through the ASPEN consultations, as described throughout this paper.

While the CASE program is evolving as we continue to learn about what works best for Nova Scotian survivors, a few key learnings that shaped the CASE program are:

BE EXPLICIT: Survivors let us know that it's most helpful to know from the very start of a relationship what service providers ARE and ARE NOT able to offer. They expressed great frustration about sharing their stories over and over again, only to be told "I'm sorry, I can't help with that", when they identified specific needs. The CASE program and its consent process was therefore designed so that survivors only have to share their story with one provider, and that provider can then source out resources through the CASE conferencing process on behalf of the participant. Also, when communicating with CASE participants, program processes and limitations are shared up front, so that participants can make decisions about what they are comfortable sharing based on what is relevant and what they can gain from the program.

OVER-INCLUSION CAN EXIST AND IT'S NOT TRAUMA-

INFORMED: Informed consent is, and always will be, the most important component of any program. This involves a lot of open communication between participants and service providers. Using a trauma-informed lens involves considering how to keep communication open with participants, in a way that is considerate of what may be triggering or activating for people. Given that CASE was designed to be participant guided and trauma informed, we grappled with whether participants should be included case conferences, where service providers discuss the situation together, brainstorm resources, and develop a potential plan. When we took this to survivors, we received unanimous feedback that they DID NOT want to be in the room.

They expressed frustration about experiences of re-traumatization when hearing from service providers that the resource they need does not exist. Particularly in the current housing climate, they have heard "no" too many times. They shared that what they most need, and what is

least traumatizing, is to know that people they trust are advocating for them and keeping them updated along the way, allowing them to be focused on other things. This wisdom really shifted the development of CASE and has since been incorporated into its design. Participants know what is happening, have control over who is involved, and can ask questions at any step of the way. They are not, however, included in most service provider meetings, which saves their time, energy and avoids re-traumatization. This leaves them with one primary point of contact, which reduces barriers, as well as confusion.

Key findings from ASPEN and CASE included themes related to: emergency shelters and housing; safety; basic material needs; transportation; substance use, harm-reduction and recovery; and self and belonging. A full needs and gaps assessment of services and supports, along with recommendations from survivors, was developed as a stand alone report and can be accessed on the TESS website <https://www.tessns.ca/tess-blog/aspenn-survivor-consultations-findings-and-recommendations>

CONCLUSION

YWCA Halifax, and the TESS Partnership, are committed to the inclusion of first voice in the development of policy, programs and services. It has taken much time and learning to feel confident in asserting that we truly are survivor-informed in the work.

Key to the practice of engaging and consulting with people who have lived experience of the sex trade is trust, which is intangible and not easily acquired without existing relationships. Trust can be fostered among participants and partnering agencies through intentional design and development of engagement sessions. People need to know that their input is meaningful and not simply an exercise of research without impact. People also need to feel like their expertise is valuable, not only for the planning and development process, but also in relation to material compensation.

Engagement and consultation are not enough when it comes to implementing a survivor-informed practice. Commitments must be made

to honor and incorporate the expertise of lived experience into policy, programs, planning and hiring practices. In addition to asking people for their expertise, organizations can also offer sustainable employment opportunities to survivors, and support their leadership development in ways that extend beyond consultation.

Organizations must take care not to tokenize first voice or place the burden of speaking for all onto a select few. The diversity of lived experiences within the sex trade is varied, as is the language people will use to describe their experiences. Generally speaking, best practice for engaging with lived experience can be summarized through the following points:

- **Language:** Listen to what language participants use and be as inclusive as possible. Use the language participants use to self-identify instead of layering on service provider, funder, or values-based approaches.

- **Inclusion:** When asking for the participation of people who have been deeply stigmatized and marginalized, be aware that trust will be your most important currency. As a result, build deep and meaningful partnerships with other service providers who already have relationships of trust.
- **Compensation:** Provide fair and timely compensation for participants for their expertise. Be aware that gift cards can be paternalistic; asking participants how they prefer to be compensated is important. Be discreet in how and when you offer compensation as some participants might be at risk if it is known that they are receiving money or gift cards.
- **Safety:** Placing safety at the centre of all projects by adopting trauma-informed practice; offering choice in how information is shared, and autonomy in what information is shared; and being intentional in the design and development of first voice consultation

- **Incorporating findings into policy and programs:** The primary purpose of consultation must always be to inform the policies and programs meant to serve community members. The advancement of academics, organizational reputation (e.g. "street cred"), access to funding, etc. must never be cause for consultations alone.

Although these strategies require a certain level of time and resource investment, the result will be the development of more effective services, and a holistic understanding of the needs and issues people with lived experience of the sex trade.

REFERENCES

1. Charlton, J., I. (1998). *Nothing About Us Without Us- Disability Oppression and Empowerment (1st ed.)*. University of California Press.
2. *Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network- Greater, Meaningful Involvement of People Who Use Illegal Drugs- A Public Health, Ethical, and Human Rights Imperative*
3. *Global Network of Sex Work Projects- Recognizing Sex Workers as Experts*
4. *Nova Scotia Department of Finance - Statistics*